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## U.S. stance on U.N. racism conference debated

August 29, 2001 Posted: 10:44 p.m. EDT (0244 GMT)



Rep. Tom Lantos

**WASHINGTON (CNN) --** The Bush administration's decision against sending U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to a United Nations conference on racism in Durban, South Africa, has sparked both criticism and praise.

Some lawmakers and civil rights leaders, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, disagree with the move.

Others say Powell should not attend because the gathering will include Arab-backed proposals accusing Israel of racism.

CNN anchor Judy Woodruff moderated a discussion on Wednesday between U.S. Reps. Tom Lantos, D-California, and Sheila Jackson-Lee, D-Texas.

**WOODRUFF:** Congressman Lantos, to you first. Is the administration right not to send Secretary Powell?

**LANTOS:** The administration certainly is right not to send Secretary Powell, and I personally want to congratulate Secretary Powell who desperately wanted to go to stand on principle. This is a conference initially designed to fight against discrimination.

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And it has become a conference to denounce and to ridicule the Democratic ally we have in the Middle East, the state of Israel. Both (U.S. National Security Adviser) Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell deserve praise for their principle stand.

**WOODRUFF:** What is so offensive about this language that is part of the makeup of this conference?

**LANTOS:** Well, Judy, I just came back from Geneva at the pre-conference

and the document, as it now stands, is an absurdity. It does not criticize a single country. It does not criticize Sudan, which currently practices slavery. It does not criticize the Taliban in Afghanistan, which is running a medieval dictatorship. It doesn't criticize China for its treatment of Tibet, but it criticizes one country on the face of this planet, the country of Israel.

And I think it was the only principled thing for us to do, to decide that the secretary should not dignify the conference with his presence.

WOODRUFF: Representative Sheila Jackson-Lee, with that language in there, why shouldn't the administration not send a high-ranking official like Secretary Powell?



Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee

LEE: Well, I'm an eternal optimist and I believe that negotiations are still going on to ensure that the most powerful nation in the world, the nation that has confronted the questions of race over and over again, has the opportunity to be the voice of reason, to likewise be part of a worldwide discussion that is so much in need of correction. Race is an issue, and religion is an issue that permeates foreign policy all over the world.

We should not be absent. So I am certainly willing to wait on the negotiations as they are proceeding, and I have been in touch with the White House. I believe that negotiations and conversations even as we speak are going on.

WOODRUFF: Are you saying, Congresswoman Jackson-Lee, that the decision could be reversed and Secretary Powell could go after all?

JACKSON-LEE: I think that, far be it for me to speak for the administration, but I think what is key is that this nation understands the importance of these issues. Otherwise my good friend Tom Lantos would not have been at Geneva.

These issues of race, these issues of solving our differences are so very important that before we conclude with finality, if, for example, (U.N. Secretary-General) Kofi Annan is still in negotiations at this point or (U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights) Mary Robinson is still in negotiations, then should allow the negotiations to proceed because the nation is so diverse, it has so much to offer. It should not be excluded or precluded from an important debate like this.

WOODRUFF: But just to be very clear, Congresswoman Lee, are you saying if the language is as it is, that the U.S. should send Secretary Powell?

JACKSON-LEE: I can't answer. I know that what I have been apprised is that we are still in negotiation, and I hope that is the case. If that is the case, then I think the administration will make an assessment on that.

WOODRUFF: Well, Representative Lantos, do you have some hopes, some reason to believe that the offending language that's offensive to you, with regard to Israel, may be eliminated after all?

LANTOS: Let me first say, Judy, that there is no colleague I have more friendship and affection for than Sheila Jackson-Lee. The American voice will be heard at Durban. Sheila will be there, I will be there, we will have a delegation from the administration. And I think we will present the American point of view crystal clearly.

No, I don't think there is any chance that Colin Powell will go, and I don't think he should. The American government has done its utmost to persuade the recalcitrant Arab and Islamic states who are trying merely to score a propaganda advantage at this conference, to clean up the language. They haven't done so, and Colin Powell made the right decision.

WOODRUFF: Let me quickly show you both what Secretary Powell said earlier this month when I interviewed him about this conference, and I asked him if he was confident that this language would be removed. This is a short segment of what he said.

COLIN POWELL, SECRETARY OF STATE: Not confident yet. I want to go to that conference. The United States wants to be represented at that conference. It's an important conference. It should be a forward-looking conference. But we should not allow the conference to be sidetracked to deal with a contemporary, political issue that is of concern to some members of the conference, and really isn't directly related to the purpose of the conference.

WOODRUFF: So, Representative Lee, how do you square what he said with what's happening?

JACKSON-LEE: I hear a glimmer of hope, frankly. And the reason I do so, and again, let me add my appreciation to the leadership that Tom Lantos has shown, and his willingness to hear people, and that's what this conference should be about. The Congressional Black Caucus in particular has been very concerned about issues dealing with racism, about reparations, about slavery.

But it has been open, it is an enormously diverse group to many, many other issues. We seek to be at the roundtable to offer the United States' voice on many diverse issues. I am hoping that my voice can be heard in Durban, South Africa at this very point. That is Kofi Annan and Mary Robinson and maybe others will realize the importance of making sure everyone is at the table and speak to positiveness of how we can resolve the crucial issues that divide the world. And I believe that we should be there.

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